**What is the Sequence of Goal Setting in a PLC?**

**Posted on September 2, 2009**

By Rick DuFour

We received a question about goals from someone who wanted to know if district goals had to be established before school goals could be created, and if school goals were necessary before team goals could be developed. He also asked how to establish a goal that would address all teams if achievement at different grade levels or departments were very different. Here is our response:

There is nothing sacred about the sequence of the goals. In fact, we have worked in many districts where there were no district goals, and so schools were left to their own devices in establishing goals. On the other hand, if a district establishes a goal, there is no chance it will be achieved if the schools reject it and head off in pursuit of their own goals. Similarly, a school will not achieve its goals if teams are free to ignore it. Once a goal is established, the people who are crucial to achieving it must adopt it as part of their own goals.

I think the best goals at the district and school levels are broad. For example, the district goal could be “We will raise the bar and close the achievement gap in all of our schools.” Elementary school goals should typically focus on math and literacy because those areas should be priorities at every grade level. On the other hand, if middle and high schools limit goals to math and literacy, teaches of other courses may feel they are not responsible for contributing. So we encourage those levels to include goals that are more encompassing, reduce the failure rate or increase the percentage of students who earn credit in the most rigorous curriculum.

An elementary school goal that says “We will increase the percentage of students who meet proficiency standards in reading on the district assessment or state assessment” is a goal that every grade level can address. If third grade had 84 percent proficient and first grade had 68 percent proficient, both know that their goal must be 84+ percent and 68+ percent. If the school establishes a more specific goal such as “We want to increase the overall percentage of students demonstrating proficiency to 80 percent,” third grade doesn’t have to improve and could even decline and still meet the goal. If a middle school says “We want to decrease the percentage of Fs,” a Physical Education team that had 4 percent Fs can contribute, but so can an Algebra team that had a 18 percent failure rate. If a high school says “We want more students demonstrating proficiency in our most rigorous curriculum,” the Spanish team can develop steps to encourage more students to pursue upper-level Spanish classes while the U.S. History team can create a plan to increase enrollment in AP U.S. History. The school and district goals can be general enough that every team can establish and contribute to more specific team goals.

I would not have teams pick and choose among goals because then the school does not have a coordinated effort. If I couldn’t have every team in an elementary school focus on both language arts *and* math, I would rather have the entire elementary school focus on math *or* language arts than have some teams focus on math and others on language arts. Similarly, I would want all teams to contribute to reducing the failure rate than some focus on that while others pursue different goals. There is power in collective learning.

Finally, two more cautions. Avoid esoteric goals that are impossible to measure such as “We want our students to be lifelong learners.” A goal is not a goal until you can establish the indicators you will track to measure progress. The pursuit of goals should provide us with the evidence we need to monitor, adjust, and improve our practice. Finally, avoid such narrow goals that you can accomplish the goal, but students actually learn less. A team that says “Our goal is to improve student achievement in capitalization” can achieve the goal even though student performance in language arts actually declines. A goal like that is fine as an interim goal for a specific unit, but not effective as a team goal for the year.

**5 Responses to “What Is the Sequence of Goal Setting in a PLC?”**

1. http://1.gravatar.com/avatar/7fbdb772729f429a98be33090198bf9d?s=32&d=http%3A%2F%2F1.gravatar.com%2Favatar%2Fad516503a11cd5ca435acc9bb6523536%3Fs%3D32&r=G*gododgers* says:

This article couldn’t have come at a better time. As a new principal I was just about to tackle this same question, “Do you need a specific order in goal setting?” Our district goal is very vague, school goals are not set, and last years SMART goals were at a various levels (depending on departments), and no PLC goals based on grade level/subject. So now the big question: On Tuesday when we are all back on campus do I/we focus on school wide goals, department goals, or a new concept for the staff, PLC goals based on the subject/grade level? I’m hoping for an umbrella approach as mentioned in the article where all departments and PLCs can work towards a school wide goal. I’m leaning towards the reduction in failing students (school) by a percent to be determined, and 2 linked to state testing. Then the departments can create department wide goals that indicate specific areas. Next, PLCs groups can narrow it down to their subject and grade taught. Almost there, teachers can make specific classroom goals, and finally the students create their own personal goals for each class. Wow, this WILL be a busy week.

* + http://0.gravatar.com/avatar/cc6eb3de519e88bd2e971266b491b69a?s=32&d=http%3A%2F%2F0.gravatar.com%2Favatar%2Fad516503a11cd5ca435acc9bb6523536%3Fs%3D32&r=G*Becky DuFour* says:

Dear gododgers,

We couldn’t agree more with your plan for establishing SMART goals at every level in the coming weeks. The district goals are usually big and broad so that everyone in the organization can establish a more specific goal strategically aligned to the overarching district and school-wide goals. The sample SMART goal templates and worksheets posted under “print” resources on this site are reproducibles you can share with your teams. The following examples of what these goals may look like at various levels of the organization should cause you to feel very affirmed in your thinking!

All the Best,  
Becky DuFour

**District Goal 1:** We will increase student achievement and close the achievement gap in all areas using a variety of indicators to document improved learning on the part of our students.  
**School Goal 1:** We will improve student achievement on all state and national assessments  
**School Goal 2:** We will reduce the failure rate in our school.

**Math Department Goal 1:**  
**Algebra I Team Goal 1:**  
**Current Reality:** In May 2008, 87% of our students met or exceeded the proficiency score on our state assessment in Algebra.  
**SMART Goal:** In May 2009, at least 90% of our students will meet or exceed the proficiency score on our state assessment in Algebra I.  
**Current Reality:** In May 2008, 85% of our students met or exceeded the proficiency score on our state assessments in Mathematics.  
**SMART Goal:** In May 2009, at least 90% of our students will meet or exceed the proficiency score on our state assessment in Mathematics.

**Algebra I Classroom Teacher A – Goal 1:**  
**Current Reality:** In May 2008, 82% of my students met or exceeded the proficiency score on our state assessment in Algebra.  
SMART Goal: In May 2009, at least 90% of my students will meet or exceed the proficiency score on our state assessment in Algebra I.

1. *A blogger from engagebluevalley.edublogs.org commented on this blog.*

Goals are also a very important part of school improvement plans. I recently ran across an article written by Rick DuFour addressing how goals could be established. Reading this was a good reminder around the importance of goals for schools.

1. http://1.gravatar.com/avatar/3b948314eb1050e9da0d2aea3861573b?s=32&d=http%3A%2F%2F1.gravatar.com%2Favatar%2Fad516503a11cd5ca435acc9bb6523536%3Fs%3D32&r=G*tsherman* says:

This conversation couldn’t have come at a better time. As a new assistant principal in Wake County (Raleigh, NC) we are tackling SMART goals at this very moment. I’m coming, as a teacher, from a school who has a great deal of success with PLC’s and setting clear goals. As I move forward in my new role I am trying to help clarify the process of writing goals at the school level. One thing that I have done with our staff is to break numbers down into number of students. What I mean is that if we say we want to move our EOG proficiency rating from 60% to 66% in 4th grade math; what does that look like in terms of the number of students that have to make that jump? What I have found is that teachers feel that our goals are much more realistic now, meaning “hey we can really do this”. In a sense, it becomes tangible. Has anyone else taken this approach? If so, what was the end result? Did it make a difference in how your staff approached the idea of school improvement and goal setting?

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Dear tsherman,

This is a great approach and we have worked with schools that make a constant effort to remind staff that the scores and percentages represent real students. For example, we met with one principal who described the process he uses at the beginning of every school year to assist teams and individuals establish SMART goals. After analyzing summative data from the state/district assessment (depending on the grade level) he creates a postcard using a yearbook photo of each student who did not demonstrate proficiency in a particular subject last year. The postcard simply states “I need your help to learn \_\_\_\_\_\_” and he lists the skills/concepts the student has not yet mastered in that subject/course.

At the first team meeting each year, all teachers bring their postcards to the meeting and work with their colleagues to cluster the students from across the grade level for extra time and support skill-by-skill. For example, the fourth grade team might discover at that first meeting they have 16 students who did not meet grade level standards in reading last year, so they work together to make a plan to give those students extra time and support in reading during their direct instruction and during their team’s intervention/enrichment block.

The principal also provides every team with the number of students they sent to the next grade level who did not demonstrate proficiency on last year’s summative assessments. Each team then writes a SMART goal based on student numbers. For example, the third grade team could establish a SMART goal such as:  
Last year, 74 out of the 90 students in third grade met or exceeded proficiency on the state assessment in reading.  
This year, we will ensure at least 90 out of our 100 third graders will meet or exceed proficiency on the state assessment in reading.

Contact the principal, Dr. James Tohme, of Enders Salk Elementary School from the “Evidence of Effectiveness” list on this website for more information regarding how this strategy is working.

Wishing you much success as you lead and support the PLC journey in Wake County,  
Becky DuFour